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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the role of continuous quality improvement (CQI) in college classroom effectiveness efforts, particularly specific institutions where sustained CQI programs have affected college classroom practice, these projects' common features, and lingering doubts about CQI. It discusses the general principles and philosophy of CQI and its particular promise in education to make students the focus, classroom effectiveness the concern, and assessment a means to gain feedback for future improvement. It looks in detail at CQI efforts at seven organizations, two within the same institution and analyzes common threads among them such as viewing students as stakeholders, customized faculty development offerings, and financial realignment. The report also addresses lingering misgivings about CQI concerning standardization, benchmarking, customer focus, teams, and quality. (Contains five references.) (JB)

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A New Alliance Continuous Quality and Classroom Effectiveness

Mimi Wolverton

Continuous quality management (CQI) first moved onto the education scene slightly more than ten years ago. Some institutions of higher learning, community colleges in particular, eagerly embraced its general precepts. Most tried to ignore CQI and it greatest advocate, the American business community. As best, a handful of stalwart organizations reluctantly tested CQI's applicability in administrative areas and student support services. Few colleges or universities ventured onto the academic turf of faculty and into their classrooms. Convinced that continuous quality was one more passing fancy, many faculty seemed content to wait it out. Now ten years later, CQI is still with us, and while skepticism remains high, examples do exist of sustained CQI endeavors in higher education where considerable inroads have been made into the classroom.

■ What is Continuous Quality Improvement?

The principles of CQI rest on an underlying philosophy of quality, which leads an organization to systematically analyze its systems for variance, make decisions based on fact, consciously define the organization's internal and external customers and actively seek input from both. It drives out fear by encouraging organization members to risk making mistakes in order to learn more about the system. It removes organizational barriers by establishing clear and open lines of communication. It educates and retrains employees, and it thrives on teamwork and interrelationships. In other words, CQI creates a structure conducive to never-ending, incremental improvement by building cooperative labor-management relations (Seymour, 1992; Cornesky, 1990).

In education, students became the focus, classroom effectiveness the concern and assessment the means by which educators gain feedback about what works and what needs to be improved. Under continuous quality, a college or university seeks to improve the quality of what it uses, does and delivers. The ultimate goal is to enhance classroom effectiveness in order to improve student learning (Chaffee and Sherr, 1992; Deming, 1982).

■ What Are the Examples?

This report looks at classroom-related CQI efforts at six institutions. Two organizations hold research one status, two are comprehensive universities and two are community colleges.

The quality initiative in the Graduate School of Business at the University of Chicago is faculty driven. It concentrates heavily on classroom assessment and personal improvement through the use of quality principles. Although the school's quality effort began in the late 1980s, it remains unintegrated across the school.

At the College of Business at Arizona State University, continuous quality improvement has been introduced college-wide by the dean. It combines active learning and some teaming within the frame that the quality principles provide and involves both curricular and pedagogical revisions.

A small group of faculty introduced CQI to the College of Engineering at Arizona State University. Their approach includes a required freshman course on active learning, assessment, team training and total quality management. Competency-based grading, which centers on cognitive and affective levels of learning, remains a highly contested element among large numbers of the faculty.

The Culture of Quality at Northwest Missouri State University began to take shape in 1984. Under the direction of Northwest's president, faculty concentrate on the processes of developing curriculum and assessing teaching and learning experiences using quality principles.

Both the president and the provost at Samford University saw merit in the university's embarkment into its Student First Quality Quest. This program cuts across the entire university. Faculty regularly use CQI tools such as cause and effect diagrams and Pareto and flow charts to diagnose curricular needs. Trained student-teams conduct term evaluations of some courses.

In 1992 after a one-year pilot program at Rio Salado Community College (a Maricopa College), the chancellor of the district moved Maricopa into Quantum Quality. Implementation has been most successful at Rio Salado where there is a heavy emphasis on total quality management training for faculty and staff. Other campuses are experiencing mixed levels of involvement.

Miami-Dade Community College is a non-CQI institution, which some refer to as an exemplar of total quality management. Its president-initiated, faculty-directed Teaching/Learning Project includes a reward system that uses teaching portfolios and a professional development program structured around advancement criteria that relate to classroom effectiveness. Classroom assessment plays a major role in Miami-Dade's efforts to improve student learning.

■ What Are the Common Threads?

Each institution views its students as customers, and there is a heightened awareness of their needs. Initiatives with the greatest faculty involvement are those where top administrators actively participate in the reform. Each college or university customized its faculty development offerings to meet its own specific requirements. Most combined active learning, continuous quality improvement (under one name or another) and teaming. All included classroom assessment as a key element. Each institution either realigned current fiscal resources or found new funding sources to accommodate the considerable financial expenditure that accompanied their moves into continuous quality improvement. People at all the colleges and universities seem to understand that change takes time.

■ What Are Some of the Lingering Misgivings About CQI?

Standardization. Professional schools, such as business and engineering, seem to have success at setting standards. This may be the case because the competencies, which their students must learn, more readily lend themselves to measurement than do those needed by students of subjects like creative writing and anthropology. In areas like these, who defines quality and who sets standards that are measurable?

Benchmarking and Customer Focus. Benchmarking and meeting customer needs are both cornerstones of continuous quality improvement. But does setting our sights on goals, based on even the most current information, give us enough freedom and flexibility to see the future? Will colleges and universities ensconced on the register of CQI organizations relegate themselves to the perpetual role of the want-to-be follower? If an organization decides to be an exemplar for others, can it lead yet continually gauge its progress by where it sits in relationship to its peers?

Teams. Teams take time, training and energy; they do not just happen. Grouping people and assuming that they will work together productively often scuttles the best of intentions. We forget to ask the obvious. Do faculty and students know how to work in teams? And, if the answer is no, do we have the impetus to teach them?

Quality. CQI organizations continually improve the quality of the processes in which they engage on a daily basis. In effect, the challenge becomes doing what we already do only better. Rarely do we question what we do. In a future filled with financial uncertainty, greater public scrutiny and more calls for accountability, exponentially exploding knowledge bases and increasingly diverse constituencies, we must ask: Is continuous quality improvement enough?

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